

The tragedy that has befallen New Orleans and the Southern United States has undermined the confidence the American people once had in the protective powers of their government. The official response to Hurricane Katrina revealed that our federal disaster management authorities, lauded for years and funded by tens of billions of dollars of taxpayer money, still do not have the training, capabilities, or leadership necessary to respond to emergencies quickly and effectively.

It should not be surprising, therefore, that a recent Newsweek poll found that fully 57 percent of the population has lost confidence that their government will respond well in the advent of a future disaster. In the same study, over half of the citizens polled said they no longer believe that the President will “make the right decisions during a domestic crisis.”

This is dangerous territory for our government to be in. What we in Congress need now is to regain our credibility in the eyes of the American people. And to do this, we need to start by honestly and responsibly evaluating why our federal government was so unable to save the lives of its own people within its own borders.

Such an evaluation cannot be achieved if we follow the advice of the Majority Leaders of the House and Senate. They have called for the creation of a bi-partisan Congressional committee to investigate the failed federal response to Katrina, but one whose membership would require a Republican majority. Republicans would have the power to control every aspect of the proceedings. They would determine which officials would be subpoenaed, and which documents could be examined. They would dictate the scope of the investigation, and determine which levels of government should be evaluated. By design, the committee would strip Democrats of any real power to have their thoughts and concerns translated into actions.

Such a plan is made all the more onerous by the fact that it is the Republican Party which controls Congress. The committee's leaders would have the responsibility of critically investigating the work of their own colleagues, but political considerations would inevitably prevent them from doing their job honestly and extensively. The concerns and well-being of the American people would be left on the sidelines, and once again, Congress would have failed to do its job.

Instead of nominating the fox to guard the henhouse, our Congress should instead embrace the

creation of an independent committee composed of non-Congressional and impartial personnel whose allegiance will be to the American people instead of to a particular party. What we need is a 9/11 Commission for Hurricane Katrina.

The 9/11 Commission was an independent body whose sole purpose was to reveal the truth about what led to the attacks of September 11th, 2001. It produced a report that was trusted by the American people, and trusted by the members of our government, largely because the Commission was not beholden to any interests besides those of its own integrity and the good of the nation. It brought credibility to our government, and restored faith among the public that even when they fail, our leaders have a genuine interest in uncovering and learning from their mistakes. For just this reason, the public today overwhelmingly supports the creation of a 9/11-type body to investigate Katrina, with 76 percent of respondents to a recent Washington Post/ABC News poll saying that they wanted one to be created.

As the shocking details of what so many of our citizens suffered through continue to be revealed, we must demand that our government possess the basic decency needed to carry out an impartial investigation of what occurred during this unprecedented disaster and why it did. Ours is a government which claims that its central preoccupations are security and the preservation of human life. It must now back up these claims by putting forward an independent and unencumbered commission which we all can trust to honestly explain why so many people died needlessly and what lessons must be drawn from our failures. If it does not, then its commitment to both life and security will evaporate, along with its worth in the eyes of the American people.